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AUTHOR Graber, Doris A.
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ABSTRACT

According to one sociological model, news is a product of socially determined notions of who and what is important and the organizational structures that result for routinizing news collection; events that deviate from these notions are ignored. This report describes a study of crime news coverage in the media that used this model to examine the following: the determinants of newsmaking, frequency of presentation, prominence of placement, and source of news flow. The data for this study came from a year-long content analysis of six daily newspapers, one weekly paper, and nightly newscasts on three national and two local television stations. The analysis reveals that individual crime receives three to four times as much attention as other issues in all of the news sources considered. The study then evaluated the vast amount of crime news coverage according to three norms: the hierarchy of social significance, the hierarchy of audience preference, and the mirror of society concept. Nine data tables and extensive notes accompany the report. (MAI)

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CRIME NEWS COVERAGE IN PERSPECTIVE

Doris A. Graber
University of Illinois at Chicago Circle

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CRIME NEWS COVERAGE IN PERSPECTIVE*

The Research Questions

Social scientists, as well as citizens in general, have complained a good deal in recent years about coverage of crime news. Crime news, it is claimed, is too plentiful in the press and on television.[1] This is bad for society because it leads to exaggerated fear of crime and rising crime rates. There are also complaints that excessive emphasis on crime news debases the news process because crime displaces other, more desirable news content. Important political news may be slighted because media routinely allot a large slice of coverage to crime and the judicial process. Another major complaint is that crime news is distorted. It creates the impression that the most violent forms of street crimes are the most prevalent. It also makes white collar crime appear insignificant in numbers and consequences.[2]

Underlying all these charges is the much debated question of what is, or ought to be,"news" and how news professionals do, or ought to, go about selecting the proper mix of a variety of news items for each paper or broadcast or for series of papers and broadcasts. The research reported here is addressed to this larger question, as well as the specific indictments of crime news coverage. To keep the report within reasonable limits, only one news-making model will be examined as a possible explanation of crime news coverage. This is the sociological model of news that is described and used in several recent analyses of newsmaking, such as Bernard Roshco's Newsmaking, Leon Sigal's Reporters and Officials, and Edward Jay Epstein's News from Nowhere.[3]

According to this model, news is a product of socially determined notions of who and what is important. These notions, in turn, lead to organizational structures which routinize news collection by establishing regular "beats." News from these beats is allotted space and air time according to fairly regular patterns. Consequently, there is a steady stream of news of varying degrees of importance from these beats. Events occurring remote from these beats, by contrast, are often ignored, except when they are sensational in nature, or when a reporter's whim has suddenly cast them into the limelight of attention as a "feature" or special investigative report.

If this sociological model is a correct representation of the process of newsmaking, it should produce a number of distinctive coverage patterns. There should be

(1) substantial similarity in the types of "news" covered by most media within the same society because most are subject to the same social pressures.

(2) Similarity should be greatest among news sources of the same general type, such as daily or weekly papers , or local or national television news, because the same technical and audience demands and intra-media competitive pressures shape their responses to social pressures. One would also expect

(3) a high degree of stability in the component parts of the news stream because of intra-organizational pressures to use a fixed portion of the news which comes from regular beats. This news flow represents substantial financial investments which cannot be discarded lightly by the news organization. It also rep-

resents large investments in personnel resources which require the recognition of effort which comes from seeing one's stories published in one's newspaper or broadcast medium.

(4) Along with the uniformity in news topics, one may anticipate considerable diversity in news play, such as length of stories, headline size, page or broadcast placement, and the like. This diversity in prominence criteria would reflect individual differences in newsmen's preferences for stories and in their appraisals of the needs and desires of their particular audiences. Journalistic conventions sanction such differences in display as a way of diversifying the appearance and thrust of an essentially homogeneous product.

(5) Finally, when it comes to crime news, the structure of the beat system would seem to pre-ordain substantially more coverage of street crime, particularly the more violent and bizarre incidents, than coverage of more routine crime occurrences, including white collar crime. Police headquarters, which dispenses street crime news information, often in the form of news releases, stress the more sensational crime incidents. By contrast, news about white collar crime is not regularly supplied through the police or any other regular beat.[4]

To answer the larger questions about the determinants of newsmaking, as well as the more specific questions about coverage of crime news, I will first of all examine the frequency of presentation of various news topics and the prominence of their placement in selected newspapers and newscasts in 1976. This information will be

evaluated in light of various extant standards of allotment of news space. Next, I will examine news flow data to determine whether crime news output is, indeed, inflexible. To do this, I will look at news output at semi-monthly intervals. Since 1976 was an election year, the supply of political news peaked at various periods throughout the year. In general, newshole did not expand to accommodate the extra news. By examining the news areas where reductions occurred during these peak periods, one can determine the elasticity of various types of news flow streams. Finally, I will briefly examine crime news coverage per se to determine whether there is, indeed, a distortion of reality which may be explained by sociological factors. Specifically, I will look at the incidence of murders, compared to other violent crimes, and the relation of white collar to street crime coverage. I will also compare newspaper crime coverage to police crime reports.

The Data Base

The data for this study come from a year-long content analysis of six daily newspapers, one weekly paper, and nightly newscasts on three national and two local television stations.[5] The daily papers used for the study were the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Daily News, the Chicago Sun Times, the Indianapolis News, the Indianapolis Star, and the Lebanon Valley News. The Chicago Tribune and the Lebanon Valley News were content-analyzed on a daily basis for six days per week to reflect the full information supply as closely as possible.[6] For the Indiana papers, every fourth day was coded, including Sundays. The Daily News and Sun Times were used primarily as comparisons for

Tribune coverage. Therefore only one constructed week was content-analyzed for each paper.

The content analyses recorded various aspects of story prominence and format as well as up to three main topics for each story. The number of topics reported therefore exceeds the number of stories.[7] Since most news stories cover more than one topic, triple topic coding gives a better picture of coverage realities than single topic coding. Table 1 illustrates the significant differences which result from these approaches.

Table 1 Distribution of Selected News Topics in the Tribune, Based on Coding of One Topic Per Story and Three Topics Per Story. (in percentages; N = 7123 for first topics, 12,144 for three topics.) *

CRIME TOPICS	Single	Triple	NON-CRIME TOPICS	Single	Triple
Individual Crimes	11.8%	16.5%	Education	6.2%	7.3%
Judiciary	20.3	15.5	Congress	8.9	6.9
Police/Security	12.9	12.7	Disast./Accid.	7.8	5.9
Political Terrorism	1.4	5.2	City Govt.	6.7	5.2
Corrupt Politics	1.9	4.0	Middle East	7.0	4.9
Drug Crimes	0.7	1.8	State Govt.	6.8	4.8
Business Crimes	1.1	1.7	Polit. Gossip	5.1	4.4
Gun Control	0.3	0.5	Energy Policy	1.1	2.7
	50.4	57.9		49.6	42.1

*Single-topic coding yielded 3592 crime topics and 3531 non-crime topics in this topic array. Triple coding yielded 7025 crime topics and 5119 non-crime topics.

Looking at 16 news topics-- eight dealing with crime subjects and eight with other topics which match the frequencies of the crime group -- we find that the share of coverage reported for eleven topics changes by more than one percentage point. The greatest changes occur in crime topic coverage, with individual crime and

terrorism increasing by 5 and 4 percentage points respectively, and stories about the judiciary declining by 4 percentage points when triple coding is used. Overall, the table indicates that the share of crime topics rises by almost 8 percentage points, compared to the non-crime topics in this topic group when one moves from single to triple coding.

In addition to the general analysis, crime stories in the Chicago Tribune were subjected to intensive analysis. They were coded on such features as the nature of the crimes that were covered, discussion of causes and motivations of crime, details revealed about particular crimes and apprehension, prosecution, conviction, and penalties. The content of stories dealing primarily with the police, the courts, and the correctional system was included in this intensive analysis. The purpose of the crime story content analysis was to provide a detailed picture of the images of crime depicted in the paper. A sample of crime stories from the Chicago Daily News and the Chicago Sun Times was also scrutinized to determine how much variability there was in the treatment of crime stories by papers published in the same locality. Additionally, crime stories in a weekly local paper, the Evanston Review, were also coded, though in a much more limited fashion.

The content analysis of print media was complemented by analyses of nightly early evening newscasts of the three national television networks and nightly local newscasts in the Chicago area. Procedures were similar to those used for print media, but with adaptations required by the different medium.[8] Since coding of

the Indianapolis and Lebanon papers is not complete at this point in time, only data from the Chicago newspapers and the five television networks will be discussed. This will present a balanced picture of the newsfare available in one major American city. Judging from the fact that other studies have documented the similarity of news offerings in major metropolitan centers, there is no reason to believe that the Chicago news scene is atypical compared to other large American cities.

Crime and Justice Media Coverage

Frequency of Crime Stories

To answer our first question, about the prevalence of Crime and Justice stories relative to other news, we coded 19,068 stories from the Tribune, 335 from the Sun Times, and 282 from the Daily News. From national network news, we coded 4763 stories from ABC, 4879 stories from CBS, and 4561 stories from NBC. From local newscasts, we coded 4592 CBS and 7371 NBC stories.[10] With up to three topics coded per story, this yielded 33,200 topics for the Tribune, 581 for the Sun Times, and 506 for the Daily News. Figures for the national networks were 7962 for ABC, 8193 for CBS, and 7667 for NBC news. For the local newscasts, the figures were 7597 for CBS and 12,274 for NBC.

In Table 2, the data on topical coverage have been arranged into four general groupings. Within these groupings, 67 separate sub-topics coded originally have been condensed into 26 sub-topics. Table 2 reveals a striking similarity among all news sources in the proportion of news devoted to various topical areas, particularly when we look at the newspapers as a group and local and national television as two separate groups. This pattern meets the expectations

Table 2 Frequency of Mention of Various Topics in the Tribune, Sun Times, Daily News, CBS and NBC Local News, ABC, CBS, NBC National News. (N= 33,200 for the Tribune, 581 for the Sun Times, 506 for the Daily News, 7597 for CBS local, 12,274 for NBC local, 7962 for ABC, 8193 for CBS, and 7667 for NBC news. Figures in %.)*

	Tribune	Sun Times	Daily N.	CBS loc.	NBC loc.	ABC nat.	CBS nat.	NBC nat.
Crime & Justice								
Police/Security	4,64	7.22	7.70	3.34	3.14	1.48	1.57	1.47
Judiciary	5.66	4.99	3.95	4.58	4.73	3.60	3.41	3.66
Corrupt./Terrorism	3.97	5.67	5.53	4.02	3.30	3.10	3.31	3.11
Individual Crime	7.50	10.15	9.48	7.76	8.51	4.06	4.01	4.64
	21.77	28.03	26.66	19.70	19.68	12.24	12.30	12.88
Government/Politics								
Presidency	2.65	0.87	1.77	2.31	1.85	4.50	4.21	4.16
Congress	2,53	4.13	2.96	1.68	1.16	3.73	4.43	4.08
Bureaucracy	1.90	1.89	1.58	1.93	1.99	4.89	4.54	4.42
Foreign affairs	9.84	9.81	10.27	4.60	5.23	16.45	17.11	14.89
Domestic policy	12.60	13.08	13.83	5.60	4.50	6.58	7.60	7.44
Elections	7.59	9.98	11.46	6.81	6.19	15.69	15.20	15.16
State government	1.76	1.37	0.79	2.76	2.16	0.59	0.85	0.84
City government	1.91	0.34	1.18	4.26	3.21	0.70	0.50	0.54
Miscellaneous	0.60	0.68	0.00	.85	1.01	0.69	0.59	0.43
	41.38	41.47	43.84	30.80	27.30	53.82	55.03	51.96
Econ./ Social Issues								
State of economy	2.42	2.06	2.37	1.11	.98	1.72	1.69	1.91
Business/labor	5.87	6.36	4.94	6.64	10.23	7.77	6.84	6.84
Minorities/Women	2.67	2.92	3.75	2.09	2.00	2.70	2.88	2.39
Environmt./transpt.	3.24	4.13	1.77	9.13	9.14	3.50	3.99	3.99
Disaster/accident	2.16	1.89	2.37	3.76	5.00	3.15	2.83	3.32
Health/Medicine	2.45	2.40	1.58	3.35	4.64	2.08	2.75	3.19
Educ./media/relig.	4.40	2.23	2.76	3.97	3.95	2.81	2.95	2.45
Leadership style	1.16	1.54	1.38	.15	.15	.76	0.70	0.57
Miscellaneous	1.69	.68	.59	1.27	1.23	1.83	1.36	1.53
	26.03	23.53	21.51	31.47	37.32	26.32	25.99	26.19
Human Interest/Hobbies**								
Gen. human interest	2.90	1.89	3.35	6.02	6.81	1.83	1.81	2.34
Celebrities	3.56	1.37	1.97	2.17	2.14	1.38	1.51	1.66
Political gossip	1.60	.51	1.18	1.35	1.35	1.40	1.13	1.39
Sports/entertainmt.	2.58	1.72	1.38	8.34	5.27	2.91	2.11	3.44
	10.64	5.49	7.88	17.88	15.57	7.52	6.56	8.83

* Sun Times and Daily News data are based on sample coding of one constructed week for each paper. NBC local news is based on full hour broadcast, others on half hour. National news data are based on nine months of coding, April-December, 1976.

** When stories of this type appeared in special sections (e.g. People, Leisure, Food, etc.) they were not coded individually. Rather, the entire section was counted as one story. This depresses the Human Interest/Hobbies story count.

flowing from the sociological model. The pattern extends to most sub-topics as well as the sub-topic groupings and is particularly pronounced within the television groups.

If we round off percentage figures and allow a leeway of one percentage point, the three national networks have identical frequencies of coverage for 25 of the 26 sub-topics. Only foreign affairs coverage is out of line with a two percentage point differential. For the local networks, only 3 of the 26 sub-topics diverge, namely business and labor subjects (3 points), health and medicine (2 points), and sports and entertainment (3 points). This leaves 23 sub-topics with nearly identical frequency of coverage. The Sun Times and Daily News, like the national networks, have similar coverage for 25 of the 26 sub-topics. Only environment and transportation is out of line with a two percentage point discrepancy. Differences in coverage patterns between the Tribune and the other papers are somewhat larger, but this may be due to the fact that the Sun Times and Daily News were coded for one constructed week only, compared to 52 weeks of coding for the Tribune. The Sun Times and Tribune differed beyond the 1 percentage point range in 8 instances; the Daily News and Tribune differed in 6 instances.[11]

Looking at the relative frequency of mention of individual topic areas, we find that crime and justice topics averaged 25% of all offerings in the newspapers, 20% of all offerings on local television, and 13% of all offerings on national television. The corresponding figures for Individual Crime are 9% for newspapers, 8% for local television, and 4% for national television. In the

Tribune, a comparatively prolific source of crime stories, the coverage of individual crimes just about matched election coverage. Individual Crime coverage was topped by only two other topic areas. These were Foreign Affairs, which includes U.S. foreign policy and events throughout the entire world, and Domestic Policy, a category that lumps together the bulk of public policy. Individual Crime received nearly three times as much attention as the Presidency or the Congress or the State of the Economy , which includes unemployment and inflation. It received nearly four times as much coverage as State Government or City Government.

For national television, which had the smallest component of Individual Crime news, it was on a par with the Presidency and Congress. It was more than twice as plentiful as news about the State of the Economy. It was outranked by news about Foreign Affairs and news about Elections by a ratio of 1 to 4 , and by news about Business and Labor and about Domestic Policy by a ratio of 1 to 2. On the local television scene, individual crime news ranked on a par with news about Business and Labor. It was outranked only by news about the Environment and Transportation, which includes weather reports. It received double the coverage bestowed on City government and triple the coverage for State Government.

Given these facts, can one say that the coverage of crime news was and is disproportionately large? This is a difficult question which cannot be answered without qualifications which set forth the norms underlying the judgment. These norms fall into three principal categories. The first bases judgments on a hierarchy of social significance. If one believes that matters other than crime-- for

example the Presidency, the State of the Economy, and Environmental questions -- are socially more significant, and that relative social significance and the corresponding social needs of the audience should determine relative space allocations, then crime coverage is too high.

One can also judge according to a hierarchy of audience preferences. Audiences, it is argued, are little concerned with the social and civic significance of news. They want news which is timely, occurring comparatively close to home, conflictual or humanly touching, and which has a readily discernible immediate impact on the reader's or viewer's life. Crime news ranks highly in all these aspects. Judged by audience preference criteria, which are widely sanctioned and applied by the journalistic profession, crime news is not excessive.

The third judgmental category might be called the modified mirror of society concept. According to this concept, news should mirror society so that events which are selected for coverage are placed into a realistically balanced context. Social news about white citizens should, accordingly, be matched by social news about black citizens; news about U.S. misdeeds abroad should be matched by corresponding news about misdeeds by other great powers; violent crimes should be depicted in proportion to their frequency in the total crime context, including non-violent crime. Judged by these criteria, the news about violent crime, as Tables 6 through 9 show, is quite excessive.

Prominance Criteria

Amount of attention which news stories receive is affected

not only by frequency of mention, but also by the prominence given to them within a news offering, such as one newspaper issue, or one news broadcast.[12] To assess this coverage dimension, I examined relative placement of Crime and Justice stories within papers and newscasts, along with story length, headline size, and other attention-arousing features. The findings for the Tribune and NBC local television are presented in Table 3. The table is based on the eight crime and eight non-crime topics listed in Table 1 grouped into two categories: Crime Stories and Non-Crime Stories. It represents better than one-third of all stories published by each of the news sources.

Table 3: Comparative Prominence of Crime and Selected Non-Crime Stories
N= 3592 crime and 3531 non-crime press stories and 1262 crime and 1283 non-crime NBC local TV news stories. Percent of stories which share most prominent and least prominent positions.

		Crime Stories		Non-Crime Stories	
		Press	T.V.	Press	T.V.
Section[a]	most prominent	60.3%		62.3%	
	least prominent	19.0		16.4	
Page[b]	most prominent	18.4		16.3	
	least prominent	37.5		34.1	
Headline[c]	most prominent	4.8	40.8	4.8	36.6
	least prominent	57.6	59.2	57.5	43.6
Pictures[d]	presence	18.9	6.0	28.1	29.2
	absence	81.1	0.0	71.9	20.3
Story Length[e]	most prom.	4.6	21.8	5.9	18.0
	least prominent	25.5	57.9	26.0	60.6

[a] most prominent = sect. 1, least prominent = sects. 3-15
[b] most prominent = p.1; least prominent = p. 6 ff.
[c] For press, most prominent = 7 or more col. inches, Height X Length; least prominent = 2 or less col. inches, Height X Length.
For T.V., most prominent = presence of verbal or written headline; least prominent equals absence of headline.
[d] For press, presence means any size picture, absence = no picture.
For T.V., presence means use of graphics or film for 75% or more stories in individual crime and non-crime subcategories. Absence means graphics or film used for 50% or less of subcategory stories.
[e] For press, most prominent = 20 col. inches or more; least prominent equals 5 col. inches or less.
For T.V., most prominent = more than 120 seconds; least prominent = less than 60 seconds.

Table 3 indicates that crime stories were displayed slightly less prominently than other stories. But the difference was slight and not even consistent for all prominence features. For all practical purposes, the two types of topics received similar coverage. We can therefore conclude that crime-related subjects received above average amounts of coverage, compared to most other topics, but did not receive preference in display. This holds true for all the media which we examined. Whatever claims are made regarding excessive attention must therefore rest solely on frequency of mention, and not on greater prominence in display. One can also say for the news sources examined here, that news professionals did not use their freedom to determine prominence criteria to downplay stories about crime and the criminal justice process. They chose a middle course, instead.

To test whether individual media varied in the prominence of display accorded to various topics, as the sociological model suggests, we compared our news sources with respect to page and section placement of various topics, length of story, headline size, amd picture allotment. Table 4 presents the data, using length of story as surrogate for all prominence criteria, and focussing on the proportion of stories in each sub-topic area which received prominent treatment. This permits us to compare treatment of "important" stories, considered significant enough to merit the most extensive type of coverage. The table confirms our hypothesis. Prominence criteria are, indeed, quite diverse within and among news source groupings. For example, the networks, which had shown such close correspondence in topic distribution in national newscasts, show wide divergence in air time

Table 4 Comparative Length of Crime and Selected Non-Crime Stories in Eight News Sources. (N = 7123 for Tribune, 238 for Sun Times, 204 for Daily News, 1601 for CBS local news, 2545 for NBC local news , and, for network news, 1668 for ABC, 1773 for CBS, 1594 for NBC).*

	Tribune	Sun Times	Daily N.	CBS loc.	NBC loc.	ABC nat.	CBS nat.	NBC nat.
Crime Stories								
Individual Crimes	3.0%	44.4%	7.7%	5.6%	18.1%	2.8%	1.5%	4.2%
Judiciary	4.7	15.4	11.8	4.6	12.6	1.2	1.9	4.0
Police/Security	5.8	17.2	15.4	11.6	30.2	4.5	5.9	0.0
Polit. Terrorism	9.6	---**	---**	14.5	9.0	0.0	6.0	3.3
Corrupt Politics	2.2	0.0**	0.0**	8.0	15.9	0.0	0.0	4.7
Drug Crimes	5.9	0.0**	---**	18.8	27.3	0.0	0.0	16.7
Business Crimes	6.0	50.0**	---**	26.2	41.9	8.3	4.2	0.0
Gun Control	0.0	---**	---**	0.0	20.0	---**	0.0**	0.0
Non-Crime Stories								
Education	4.8	0.0**	0.0	6.1	33.6	2.2	4.1	15.6
Congress	5.6	0.0	14.2	0.0	2.6	3.5	3.5	2.6
Disast./Accid.	4.3	20.0	8.3	3.8	10.8	1.3	2.9	4.3
City Govt.	6.9	0.0**	0.0	17.8	36.5	0.0	16.7	7.5
Middle East	5.8	10.0	0.0	0.0	1.2	1.6	1.9	2.1
State Govt.	4.5	0.0	50.0	8.7	25.6	3.4	7.6	0.0
Polit. Gossip	11.3	0.0**	100.0**	11.3	7.7	3.7	0.0	3.7
Energy Policy	6.3	0.0**	--.**	8.4	26.3	11.5	10.2	15.9

* The figures indicate the percentage of stories in each topical area which received most prominent treatment. For newspapers, most prominent equals more than 20 column inches. For television, most prominent equals more than 120 seconds of air time.

** Dashes mean that no stories were recorded in the sub-topic area. Figures based on N's which are too small to be meaningful also are double-starred.

allotted to similar topics. Only Congress and Middle East stories received very similar top coverage. On 10 of the 16 topics included in the table, coverage differences were substantial (3 to 17 percentage points.)

On local television news casts, only Middle East story treatment was similar in air time exposure. For all other topics, stations varied considerably in top coverage (3 to 19 percentage points). Comparisons between and among the newspapers are too unreliable for the limited number of topics included in the table. However a comparison of all topics for the three papers shows trends toward diversity in news play quite in line with those displayed by the television networks.[13]

Fluctuations in News Coverage Trends: Is There a Gresham's Law?

If the sociological model of newsmaking is valid, then one would expect a high degree of regularity in the component parts of the news stream. Table 5 indicates that this is, indeed, the case. When we examined semi-monthly fluctuations , we found great stability in the percentage of total news devoted to Crime and Justice news, news about Government and Politics, news about Economic and Social Issues, and Human Interest and Hobbies news. Table 5 presents the means, the standard deviations, and coefficients of variation. It shows very narrow dispersions around the mean in the majority of instances. The proportion of news devoted to Economic and Social Issues was most constant of all, followed by news about Government and Politics. The shares allotted to Crime and Justice news and to Human Interest and Hobbies news were most flexible.

Table 5 Semi-Monthly Fluctuations in News Coverage Trends: Means, Standard Deviations, Coefficients of Variation. (N= 19,068 Tribune stories,4592 CBS local news stories, 7371 NBC local news stories, 4763 ABC national news stories, 4879 CBS national news stories, and 4561 NBC national news stories.)

Topics	Mean	S.D.	Var.		Mean	S.D.	Var.
Tribune				ABC National			
Crime & Justice	18.88%	1.96	0.10		9.00	3.79	0.42
Government/Politics	48.50	3.81	0.08		63.33	6.71	0.11
Econ./Social Issues	19.08	3.27	0.17		20.78	3.97	0.19
Human Int./Hobbies	13.58	2.43	0.18		6.83	3.35	0.49
CBS Local				CBS National			
Crime & Justice	18.75	3.91	0.21		9.44	2.98	0.32
Government/Politics	29.92	5.40	0.18		64.78	6.61	0.10
Econ./Social Issues	31.25	5.06	0.16		19.94	4.12	0.21
Human Int./Hobbies	20.00	3.42	0.12		6.06	2.88	0.48
NBC Local				NBC National			
Crime & Justice	19.71	4.22	0.21		9.83	2.41	0.25
Government/Politics	26.33	4.09	0.16		60.72	7.54	0.12
Econ./Social Issues	37.75	3.91	0.10		21.39	4.78	0.22
Human Int./Hobbies	16.00	2.47	0.15		8.39	3.52	0.42

Semi-monthly scores for each topic group only rarely reached or exceeded two standard deviations. Out of a total of 576 semi-monthly scores for the 4 groups, only 22 (3.8%) amounted to two or more standard deviations. The Tribune had most, with six deviant scores, followed by CBS local and NBC national news with 4 each. ABC and CBS national news had 3 each, and NBC local news 2. Topically, there was little difference. Crime and Justice and Human Interest/ Hobbies news had 6 instances each of coverage deviating widely from the mean. Government and Politics news and Economic and Social Issues had 5 and 4 major deviations, respectively. The bulk of the fluctuations (16 out of 22) represented upward, rather than downward deviations, demonstrating that it is easier to increase regular allotments of space and time than to cut them.

Does the high degree of regularity in the component parts of the news stream mean that the news mix is impervious to demands for time and space which may arise from political and socio/economic crises? More specifically, does Crime and Justice news contract as political news expands? To answer this question, we plotted semi-monthly fluctuations in news about Politics and news about the Justice System in the Tribune. Figure 1 presents the information. While the fluctuations in news flow are narrow, Figure 1 does show that peaks in Political news are usually matched by valleys in Crime and Justice news and vice versa. This mirror image is slightly more pronounced in the match between these two topic areas than in matches between other topic areas. Hence there is some evidence in support of the conclusion that Justice System news does, indeed, contract to make way for socially more significant news. Gresham's law is not an iron one.

However, the data can be interpreted differently. Justice System news may be the dog that wags the political news tail, rather than the reverse. To check for this possibility, we examined the semi-monthly variations of Election news and news about Individual Crime. Election news had well-defined expansion points in 1976. It was bound to rise at times of primary elections, political conventions, the presidential debates, and during the final election week. The supply of news about individual crimes was apt to be quite stable throughout the year. Hence a pattern which showed election news expanding at the high points of the election contest, and crime news contracting, would indicate that crime news was the dependent variable.

Fig. 1 Semi-Monthly Fluctuations in News About "Politics," the "Justice System," "Crime," and "Elections" in the Tribune. N= 9207 for "Politics" stories, 3511 for "Justice System" stories, 2205 for "Elections" stories, 909 for "Crime" Stories

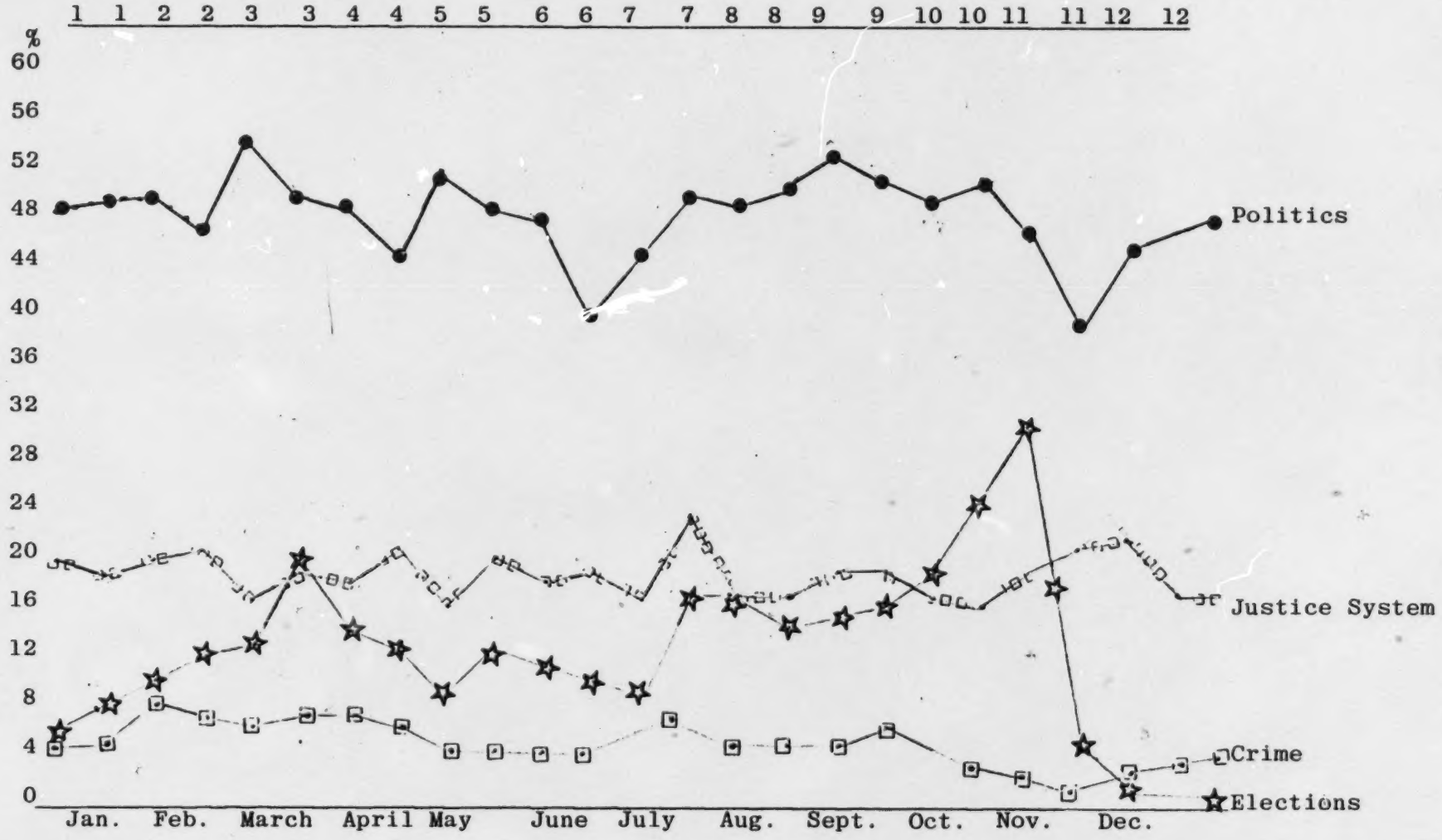

Figure 1 shows that Election news was allowed to peak at the crucial times, and that its bulges were reflected in bulges in the Politics category. In turn, as already noted, the fluctuations in Politics news are complemented by accommodations in Justice System news. The fluctuations in the news about Individual Crime are extremely small and correlations with Election news fluctuations are weak. Apparently, Justice System news as a group gives way, to a moderate degree, to Politics news, but the adjustments are made in components other than news about Individual Crime. Moreover, upward and downward compensatory bulges are generally followed by a bulge in the opposite direction so that the total news flow, over time, remains constant in each group. The patterns of semi-monthly fluctuations in various news components presented by local and national television news are similar to those of the Tribune shown in Figure 1.

Distortions in Crime News Coverage

Like questions about appropriate levels of coverage, questions about distortion of news must be answered within a framework that sets forth the standards by which distortion is judged. The appraisal presented here rests on two assumptions. These are, first of all, that white collar crimes, particularly many business crimes involving threats to public health and safety, are of equal or greater social significance than violent crimes against individuals. Secondly, it is assumed that the modified mirror image concept, described on page 11, represents a valid guide for appraising fairness of coverage. Applied to crime and justice news, this means that serious white collar crime

should be given coverage which is proportionate to serious violent crimes against individuals.[14] If these assumptions are granted -- they are debatable-- then Crime and Justice news is as badly distorted as its severest critics claim. Tables 6 through 9 tell the story. They also present further support for the sociological model of news-making. As predicted from the model, news about violent crimes, which is readily available from police beats, is far more plentiful than crime news which is not as readily available from these beats.[15]

Table 6 indicates the frequency of mention of various types of crimes in 8 news sources.

Table 6 Frequency of Mention of Various Types of Crimes
N= 3545 for Tribune, 92 for Sun Times, 76 for Daily News, 815 for CBS local TV news, 1501 for NBC local TV news, 568 for ABC national TV news, 599 for CBS national TV news, and 587 for NBC national TV news. In percentages. *

				Local		National		
	Trib.	Sun	D.N.	CBS	NBC	ABC	CBS	NBC
Street Crimes	56.5	51.0	52.6	49.9	46.8	46.8	43.0	47.0
Terrorism	17.7	17.3	15.7	12.5	24.2	22.8	23.0	16.6
Corruption	13.6	18.4	21.0	21.7	13.2	20.5	22.3	24.0
Drug Offenses	6.1	6.5	5.2	4.5	4.7	3.3	3.8	3.7
Business Crimes	5.9	6.5	5.2	11.2	10.8	6.3	7.6	8.5

*Sun Times and Daily News data are based on sample coding of one constructed week for each paper. National news data are based on nine months of coding, April-December, 1976. NBC local news is based on hour long broadcast, other TV news on half hour broadcasts.

It shows that street crimes received most plentiful coverage by far. But the figures for white collar crime, which are recorded under the headings of "corruption" and "business crime" are by no means insignificant. They range from a low of 20% of the total crime coverage in the Tribune, to a high of 33% on CBS local and NBC national news. Overall, street crime constituted slightly less than half of all crime

discussed on television, and slightly more than half of all crime discussed in the newspapers.[16] It is dominant, but not to the degree which critics of crime news coverage would lead us to believe.[17]

Table 7 presents data on the prominence of display of various types of crime stories in the Tribune.

Table 7 Prominence of Display of Various Types of Crime Stories in the Tribune. (N = 2006 for Street Crimes, 628 for Terrorism, 481 for Corruption, 57 for Drug Offenses, 212 for Business Crimes. In percentages.)

	Page 1	Section 1	Picture Present	Large Headl.*	Long Story*
Street Crimes	18.7%	66.2%	19.5%	4.5	3.0%
Terrorism	14.5	73.3	18.8	7.0	9.6
Corruption	20.0	61.6	23.7	6.9	2.2
Drug Offenses	14.2	45.1	14.7	4.1	5.9
Business Crimes	20.8	69.1	13.2	4.7	6.0

*Large headline = 7 or more col. inches, multiplying height by length. Long story = 20 col. inches or more.

It sheds light on ways in which news play factors enhance or diminish the relative prominence bestowed on white collar crime stories through sheer frequency of mention. The table shows that white collar crime stories received basically the same display as street crime stories in prominent page and section placement, headline size, story length, and pictorial coverage. Prominence features thus do not serve as a counterbalance to the trends established through story selection.

Table 8 tells a similar story of slighting of white collar crime, but to a lesser degree than might be expected. It presents the rank order of frequency of mention of the twelve crimes which head the list when all Tribune stories are ranked for the year.

Table 8 Rank Order of Frequency of Mention of Street and White Collar Crime in the Tribune. 12 ranks only = 77% of crime topics. N= 2619 topics.

Rank	Street Crime	%	Rank	White Collar Crime	%
1.	Murder	24.2	3.	Consumer Fraud	5.9
2.	Robbery	12.9	6.	Bribery/Kickb.	4.6
4.	Assault	5.8	10.	Drug Offenses	2.8
5.	Kidnapping	5.1	11.	Tax Cheating	2.3
7.	Arson	4.5	12.	Extortion	2.1
8.	Rape	3.4			
9.	Larceny/Theft	3.4			

Seven street crimes make it into the list and two capture top spots. But two white collar crimes, Consumer Fraud and Bribery and Kickbacks, also rank highly, attaining a third and sixth place, respectively. When one compares these media rankings to police and court records, the match is poor.

Table 9 presents such a comparison for street crime, comparing the coverage of crimes recorded in the official police record with coverage of corresponding crimes in the Tribune.

Table 9 Comparative Frequency of Mention of Index Crimes by Chicago Police Official Record and by Tribune, 1976. (N= 1377 for Tribune, 212,270 for police.*)

Police Index Crimes	N	%	Tribune Index Crimes	N	%
Murder	820	0.2	Murder	689	26.2
Rape	1,172	0.4	Rape	88	3.4
Robbery	17,489	5.7	Robbery	283	10.8
Assault	11,001	3.6	Assault	152	5.8
Burglary	38,369	12.4	Burglary	56	2.1
Theft	111,008	36.0	Theft	90	3.4
Auto Theft	32,421	10.5	Auto Theft	19	0.7
	212,270	68.8		1,377	52.4

*Tribune coverage dates start and end one week later than police crime report dates. Police dates are 1-8-76 to 1-5-77. Tribune data include crimes outside the Chicago area and therefore are not strictly comparable to Chicago police data.

Murder, the most sensational crime, constitutes 0.2% of all crimes recorded in the police index. In the Tribune, it constitutes 26.2% of all crime mentions. By contrast, unglamorous crimes like theft and car theft, constitute 47% of all crimes on the police index, but only 4% of all crimes mentioned in the Tribune . While police and Tribune figures are not precisely comparable because Tribune crime coverage reaches beyond the Chicago area covered by the police reports, and while there are slight discrepancies in the dates for which coverage is reported, the trends demonstrated by the data are accurate. An exaggerated picture is presented of the incidence of the most violent kinds of crime, while the incidence of lesser crimes is minimized.

Summary and Conclusions

The data presented in this paper support most, but not all, charges made against crime news coverage.

Crime news receives ample coverage and display compared to other types of news. By social significance criteria, it is excessive. However, if current notions about audience preferences are accurate -- and readership and viewer data seem to support them -- then ample coverage of crime news can be justified as satisfying a strong consumer demand.

##Crime news does not, apparently, prevent political news from expanding at times of major political activity, such as elections. However, when contractions take place to compensate for increased political coverage, they are followed by expansions so that the total news flow for various news categories remains constant over time.

Crime news does distort the realities of crime commission by disproportionate emphasis on street crime, compared to white collar crime. It also presents a distorted image of the relative incidence of various types of street crimes by exaggerating murder, rape, and assault and underrepresenting robbery, burglary, and theft.

The news coverage characteristics described in this paper are consistent with a sociological model of newsmaking.

There is substantial similarity in the types of news presented by various newspapers and television sources, and substantial stability in the frequency with which these news areas are covered. This type of stability is a natural concomitant of a news system which shares notions about newsworthiness of institutions and events and develops an organizational structure to provide regular coverage for the pre-selected institutions and events.

The beat system encourages coverage of crime news readily available from regular police sources and discourages coverage which is off the beat. The finding that street crime news receives the lion's share of coverage conforms to this expected pattern. However, white collar crimes do receive substantial attention, possibly because they are made available from different beats, such as prosecuting agencies, grand juries, or court dockets.

Finally, as predicted, the display features of news vary widely among the sources examined here. This finding, when coupled with the finding of striking similarity in topics covered and in frequency of coverage, underlines the limits of the beat system. Beats determine the sources of most news and assure a steady, constant

stream of regular coverage. But once the news is in the pipeline, the constraints of newsmaking attenuate and individual choices emerge and are encouraged to meet the needs of specific audiences and the whims of news personnel.

While the sociological model has thus been fully supported with respect to all the dimensions examined here, further testing is required to strengthen the findings. More importantly, the data collected for this study need to be tested with alternative models to examine whether there may possibly be better fits between the data and other models. Given the results reported here, it seems doubtful that better fits could be attained.[18]

Footnotes

* The research reported here was made possible through financial support from the Center for Research in Criminal Justice, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, Hans W. Mattick, Director. Computer services were made available through the Computer Center at the University. The support of these organizations is gratefully acknowledged.

1. For data indicating that mass media information is the basis for public reactions to crime problems, see James Garofalo, "Victimization and Fear of Crime in Major American Cities," American Association for Public Opinion Research paper, 1977. Also see "Public Attitudes Towards Crime and Law Enforcement," in Task Force Report, Crime and its Impact: An Assessment, The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1967, pp. 85-95, especially pp. 86-87. Data on the contagion effects of crime news are presented by David and Kay Payne, "Newspapers and Crime in Detroit," Journalism Quarterly, vol. 47, 1970, pp. 233-235.

2. The most complete review of public opinion data on crime is contained in four reports by Hazel Erskine in the spring, summer, fall and winter issues of the Public Opinion Quarterly, vol. 38, 1974. The reports are entitled "Fear of Violence and Crime, pp. 131-145; "Causes of Crime," pp. 288-298; "Control of Crime and Violence," pp. 490-502, and "Politics and Law and Order," pp. 623-634. For suggestions on the limitations of polls, see Terry Baumer and Fred DuBow, "'Fear of Crime' in the Polls: What They Do and Do Not Tell us," American Association for Public Opinion Research paper, 1977. Also see Michael J. Hindelang, "Public Opinion Regarding Crime, Criminal Justice, and Related Topics," Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, Vol. 11, July 1974, pp. 101-116.

3. Bernard Roshco, Newsmaking. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1975. Leon V. Sigal, Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking. Lexington , Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1973. Edward Jay Epstein, News from Nowhere: Television and the News. New York: Vintage Books, 1974.

4. Police wires to the press are discussed in Mark Fishman, "Crime Waves as Ideology," Society for the Study of Social Problems paper, 1977.

5. Collaborators for the content analyses were Professor Maxwell McCombs of Syracuse University and Professor David Weaver of Indiana University and their associates. Each investigator and associates was responsible for data collected in her/his geographical location.

6. More detailed data on content analysis methods, coder reliability controls, etc. are available on request from the author. Coding of several media on a daily basis makes it possible to judge the completeness of news coverage and to gauge the repetition rates of various stories and themes.

7. Stories were defined as including editorials, letters to the editor, features, and cartoons, along with ordinary news reports, but excluding advertisements, obituaries, puzzles, radio and television listings, and similar types of announcements.

8. The local broadcasts were coded directly from the actual broadcast event. The network newscasts were analyzed from written abstracts prepared by the staff of the Vanderbilt Television News Archives. Comparison of control codings taken from the actual broadcast with abstract codings showed no significant differences for the type of coding relevant to this paper. The reliability of coding for the content analyses was carefully checked and controlled. Since many different coders were involved in this project, it is difficult to report a single reliability figure. Our procedure was to have the same coding supervisor check each coder's work following the initial training period, and at various times thereafter. Excluding simple identification categories, like paper or station name and date, which could inflate reliability figures, intercoder reliability averaged 85% and intra-coder reliability averaged 90%.

9. Data on the similarity of coverage in a cross section of 20 daily newspapers are discussed in Doris A. Graber, "Effect of Incumbency on Coverage Patterns in the 1972 Presidential Campaign," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 53, Fall 1976, pp. 499-508.

10. The reason for the larger number of NBC local stories, compared to CBS, is the fact that the local broadcast was expanded to 90 minutes during the last three months of the study. The figures for the networks represent coding from April through December only because coding for the first three months of 1976 has not been fully completed. Preliminary analyses indicate that addition of these data will not change the picture presented here.

11. Complementary data can be found in E. Terrence Jones, "The Press as Metropolitan Monitor," Public Opinion Quarterly, vol. 40, 1976, pp. 239-244; Shari Cohen, "A Comparison of Crime Coverage in Detroit and Atlanta Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly, vol. 52, 1975, pp. 726-730; and John C. Meyer, Jr., "Newspaper Reporting of Crime and Justice: Analysis of an Assumed Difference," Journalism Quarterly, vol. 52, 1975, pp. 731-734. For a contradictory view, see Emery L. Sasser and John T. Russell, "The Fallacy of News Judgment," Journalism Quarterly, vol. 49, 1972, pp. 280-284.

12. For comparative data which show that crime subjects receive average display, see Doris A. Graber, "Evaluating Crime-Fighting Policies: The Public's Perspective," American Political Science Association

12. (ctd.) paper, 1977. The impact of various display characteristics is discussed in Richard W. Budd, "Attention Score: A Device for Measuring News 'Play,'" Journalism Quarterly, vol. 41, 1964, pp. 259-262.

13. The bases for chosing particular stories for television news are discussed in James K. Buckalew, "A Q-Analysis of Television News Editors' Decisions," Journalism Quarterly, vol. 46, 1969, pp. 135-137.

14. Crime stereotypes and their deviation from factual data are discussed in Austin Turk, "The Mythology of Crime in America," Criminology, vol. 8, 1971, pp. 397-411. Also see Richard Quinney, The Social Reality of Crime. Boston: Little Brown, 1970, pp. 15-25 and Bob Roshier, "The Selection of Crime News by the Press," pp. 55-72 in Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds. The Manufacture of News: Social Problems, Deviance, and the Mass Media. London: Constable, 1973.

15. See Fishman, cited in note 4, and Roshier, cited in note 14.

16. For the relation of street crime news to news about the judiciary, and about police and security matters, see Table 2 , p. 8.

17. The views of critics of crime news coverage are presented more fully against the background of coverage data in Doris A. Graber, " Ideological Components in the Perception of Crime and Crime News," Society for the Study of Social Problems paper, 1977.

18. For the fit of a portion of the data with the Marxist model of crime news production, see Graber, cited in note 17.